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A democracy in motion

With high stakes, Mongolia prepares for a crucial electoral showdown

Mongolia, nestled between authoritarian neighbours China and Russia, has established itself as a stable democracy. While dependencies on its two neighbours exist, the government actively pursues robust relationships with democratic nations in Europe and elsewhere, coined as its 'third neighbour policy'. Vice versa, Mongolia is also becoming the focus of international partnership interests.

Amid global concerns of democratic backsliding, Mongolia is reinforcing its democracy with the upcoming 9th parliamentary election since the democratic revolution in 1990. The campaign period was officially opened on 10 June and lasted until 26 June, with the election itself taking place two days later on 28 June. As has been the case in all elections since 2008, the Mongolian electoral system has changed since the last election, leading to a new dynamic in party strategies. Key to the election's outcome, both in terms of voter turnout and the result, will be the extent to which voters are frustrated with the Mongolian People's Party (MPP), which has governed for the past eight years. Regardless of the election outcome, Mongolian policy, particularly its foreign policy, is likely to remain stable.

New rules and more changes

Mongolia has switched back and forth between majoritarian elections and proportional representation over the past five elections. These changes have been brought about by debates about the best way to reflect voters' views, but also constitutional questions. This year's election resembles the German electoral system somewhat in that voters will have a vote in district-based direct elections and another to select a party that will send members to parliament based on a party list. The biggest difference compared to the German system is that Mongolia's direct election constituencies are multi-member districts. Voters will thus vote for between two and 10 members of parliament depending on their district.

Last summer, two other significant changes were made: the parliament was enlarged from 76 seats to 126 seats, with 78 seats filled through direct elections and 48 through proportional representation. Additionally, the direct elections will occur in 13 very large constituencies, six in the capital, Ulaanbaatar, and the remaining seven covering one to three provinces across the sparsely populated rest of the country. These constituencies replaced the previous system of voting by province or capital city district. Some suspect the MPP of pushing for this change to benefit incumbents, others see this as the beginning of a move toward a regionalisation of the structure of the Mongolian state.

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While these changes are hard to keep track of even for someone paying close attention to Mongolian politics, the General Election Commission has a good track record of voter education and previous changes to the electoral system have mostly been implemented without any confusion. As an innovation in voter education, the Commission offered polling station simulations to citizens in the run-up to the campaign period.

Multi-member districts, while common in state and municipal elections, are rare for national elections. They pose significant challenges to electoral strategising as candidates may be running against fellow party members. This has contributed to the overall personalisation of Mongolian elections, where voters seem to focus more on choosing individual leaders rather than deciding on the overall direction for the country.

Surprisingly perhaps, the main motivation behind the current set of changes is the desire by Prime Minister L. Oyun-Erdene's MPP to relinquish its super-majority in parliament. The party currently governs with a majority of 63 seats in the 76-member parliament. While this super-majority enables constitutional changes and thus allowed the MPP to pass the amendments that anchor the new election system in the constitution, the government has struggled to enforce party discipline. With only a small opposition in parliament, the MPP has also felt the need to take full responsibility for its actions, as there is no opportunity to blame mistakes on others. The current system may have thus been crafted to engineer a more moderate majority, and it currently seems like the MPP may well be granted that wish.

Campaign Topics

The greatest challenge that Mongolia continues to face at the moment is how to turn resource wealth into an ecologically, economically and socially sustainable future. Yet, this challenge features less in the current election campaign than it has in other recent elections. There seem to be two main reasons for this: the relative calm surrounding the giant *Oyu Tolgoi* copper mining project and the lack of visibility of firebrand populism (so far).

In January 2022, negotiations between the government and *Oyu Tolgoi* investor Rio Tinto resulted in the cancellation of a substantial amount of debt that had been incurred when the government acquired a 34 per cent stake in the project as part of an investment agreement made in 2009. The agreement had already been modified in 2015 and may face a continuing cycle of re-negotiation/settlement, but the current moment is a calm one, with production revving up and global copper prices soaring. The *Oyu Tolgoi* mine is by far the largest industrial project in Mongolia and thus significantly contributes to the economy.

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Although some candidates who have adopted populist, often anti-mining, agendas are running in this election, they have been relatively invisible. Former President Kh. Battulga is running in a constituency that includes Erdenet, the site of Mongolia's older copper mine. Former presidential candidate S. Ganbaatar is running for the Democratic Party in a rural constituency. The lack of attention to their brand of populism may well be related to the current settled state of mining questions.

The issue of corruption, on the other hand, may pose the greatest threat to the Mongolian People's Party's re-election bid. Ulaanbaatar saw large protests in December 2022 that responded to revelations of corruption and self-serving side deals in a state-owned company supplying coal from the *Tavan Tolgoi* deposit to Chinese industrial customers. The government responded with announcements of increased vigilance against corruption, yet, few officials have actually been prosecuted for the 'coal theft' affair or other revelations.

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proportional representation with relatively unknown candidates. This may run counter to the logic dominant in other proportional representation systems where party leaders may secure 'safe' seats on party lists for themselves, as other parties like the DP and KhUN seem to have planned. The MPP has sent its incumbents and leadership into direct election races, hoping that local organisational resources will help them carry these races, and has used the party list to signal a desire for change. To select the 'perfect' mix of candidates, the party commissioned a study in advance to analyse the social structure of Mongolia. Candidates were nominated on the basis of the outcomes. The MPP is now running with many political newcomers from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds — a quite unique phenomenon.

The MPP has attempted to craft an election system that will return a majority — but not the super-majority that the party has been struggling with for the past four years. At the moment, that outcome seems likely. The two main challenger parties, DP and KhUN, will gain seats in parliament, perhaps primarily through the proportional representation avenue, but they will likely not be able to challenge the MPP's government. There may also be several smaller parties with charismatic leaders who might be elected. The constellation coming out of the election is unlikely to have a major impact on policy, as the election for many voters is – once again – focused on candidates and their personal characteristics rather than on competing policy agendas — even though some of the party platforms attempt to signal more substantive change.



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